

Prophecy and the Bible

Prophetic writings (prophecies) are prominent in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Many Christians find prophecies to be daunting and confusing. This is unfortunate. To better understand prophecies, it is important to know their timing, to whom they are directed, and whether they speak to future events or have already been fulfilled. Beyond God, Jesus, His ministry, and the Holy Spirit, prophecy is probably the biblical subject about which more has been written than anything else. Tens of thousands of books have been written on the subject because, for many, they address or predict the future in which all of us have interest. But is that really the main purpose of prophetic writing?

To understand biblical prophecies, it is essential that you know what prophecy is about, what they reveal, and which ones have already been fulfilled. If you do not know what prophecies of the Bible have already come to pass, God's purposes, especially prophecies about 'end times,' will be challenging to understand, leaving many questions unanswered. Three definitions of the word prophecy are provided in the Webster's Dictionary:

- 1) an *inspired utterance* of a prophet.
- 2) the inspired declaration of *divine will and purpose*.
- 3) a *prediction of something to come*.

The **first** is obvious and true for anyone that considers the Bible the sacred and inspired Word of God. Peter made it clear – "(the prophets) spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20, 21). Prophets are writing on behalf of God and reveal His will, some of which include events in the future.

The **third** definition is the one that grabs our attention – the essence and timing of world *end times* events, also known as eschatology. This definition is valid as well because many prophecies, even from Jesus himself, speak to future events. Consider frequently used synonyms that Roget and others offer for the word *prophecy* . . .

Arguing	What many do regarding prophecies about <i>future</i> events.
Augury	Omens and the <i>foretelling</i> of events.
Bodement	Omens, <i>foreshadowing</i> , prognostication.
Casting	<i>Projecting</i> or throwing something forward.
Forecasting	The act of providing details of <i>something ahead</i> .

Foretelling	<i>Predictions, statements about the future.</i>
Predicting	Foretelling events on the basis of special knowledge.
Presaging	Warning of a <i>future</i> occurrence.
Prognosticating	<i>Foretelling</i> in advance based on signs and symptoms.
Soothsaying	<i>Foretelling</i> events based on divination.
Vaticinating	<i>Predicting</i> divinely inspired knowledge of <i>the future</i> .

It is little wonder that prophecy evokes a sense of wanting to know what lies ahead. That is our conditioning on the matter. That is the thought that comes to mind when we hear the word *prophecy*. Though future events are declared in the Bible, God's desires for our lives need to be considered as well.

The second Webster definition is the one often overlooked. Many fixate on dates and times related to the end of the world but neglect to embrace the prophetic writings that share **God's divine will and purpose for present and future ages**. Considering what has been shared to this point, a stronger definition of biblical *prophecy* might be . . .

Prophecy: divine utterances of individuals chosen by God to declare His will and purposes, including future events for various eras of the history of the family of God.

The Bible has over 1,800 prophecies encompassing over 8,000 verses that fit somewhere in this definition. More than 1,200 are in the Old Testament and almost 600 can be found in the New Testament. Some prophecies are contained within a single verse and others span many verses. All prophecies in the Bible relate in some way to God's plan of salvation.

God's Plan of Salvation

The first book of the Bible reveals the beginning of life as we know it. God's purposes are revealed early in Genesis – the creation of all good things, including humans formed in the image of God and given eternal life (**Genesis 1:27**). Adam and Eve were to be fruitful and multiply (**Genesis 1:28**), and rule over an abundance of resources made for them by God (**Genesis 1:29-31**). This they were to do while obeying a few simple requests made by God (**Genesis 2:15-17**). Keeping those requests ensured their immortality. Disobeying them would lead to spiritual death (**Genesis 2:17**). Unfortunately, Adam and Eve chose the latter, a sinful condition that every human being has inherited since, in which the human spirit cannot have fellowship with a Holy God.

But that was not the end of the story. Our wonderful God provided a rescue plan, a lifeline we call the plan of salvation. The remaining books of the Bible share the story, often punctuated with prophecies given at key points along the way, in an attempt to keep people of faith on course. The totality of God's plan of salvation plays out and spans

multiple covenants, many personalities but all people, and thousands of years. The plan includes the following **key themes**:

Life of the Israelites (the family of God under the Old Covenant)

Most of the prophecies of the Old Testament focused on God's will revealed in the life of the Hebrew people, the Israelites of the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel) and their descendants. The Israelites, a particular people chosen by God, are more commonly known as Jews. Though God made promises or covenants with other Old Testament characters (Noah for example as recorded in **Genesis 9:8-17**), His primary covenant was with Abram, meaning 'exulted father' (**Genesis 12:1-3**). Later, Abram was renamed Abraham (meaning 'father of many') when God shared the *everlasting* covenant with him (**Genesis 17:1-8**).

This is vitally important because, even though we live life in Jesus Christ under the *New Covenant*, the *everlasting* covenant made with Abraham and his immediate descendants that we call the *Old Covenant* of the Law, was transformed, and extended to everyone through the ministry of Jesus Christ in the New Covenant and God's grace. Please read these important scripture passages about this – **Galatians 3:1-29** and **Hebrews 11:8-12**.

God revealed His will to the Israelites through the Law given to them at Mt. Sinai (**see Exodus chapters 19 and following**). Unfortunately, the Israelites repeatedly disobeyed the Law. God raised up many prophets over many years and warned the Israelites, through them, about their rebellious ways. Those warnings described future blessings that would be realized if they heeded them, as well as future calamities if they refused (**Jer. 25:1-4** is a good example). The actual outcome depended on the course that the Israelites chose to follow. Over and over, they chose disobedience.

Messianic Prophecies

In the course of time, God revealed more of His will and purposes, indicating through many prophets that a Messiah would come to the world, redeem the world from sin, and enlarge the family of faithful. That Messiah was Jesus, called Immanuel, 'God with us' (**Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22-23**). Some scholars believe there are more than 300 prophecies of a coming Messiah in the Old Testament. Others say fewer, but most agree that every one of them was fulfilled with the birth, life, and ministry of Jesus Christ – fathered by the Spirit of God through a virgin named Mary (**Matthew 1:18-25**) and raised by Joseph and Mary in the town of Nazareth. Prophecies about Jesus' coming were highly detailed and given over hundreds of years. Here are just a few of the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah:

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| Isaiah 7:14 | He will be born of a virgin. |
| Micah 5:2 | He will be born in Bethlehem. |
| Zechariah 9:9 | He will enter Jerusalem riding a donkey and be hailed a king. |

Psalm 41:9 He will be betrayed by a close friend.

Psalm 22:16-18 His hands and feet will be pierced, and his garment divided.

Jesus, God's Spirit presence on earth, was born, lived and experienced early life with his family in Nazareth, was announced as God's Son when John baptized him in the Jordan River (**Matthew 3:13-17**), called disciples to follow him (**Luke 5:1-11**), taught, healed, performed miracles, and ministered in many ways for three years. In God's timing, Jesus was taken into custody, unjustly tried by Jewish leaders and Roman authorities (**Mark 15:1-15**), was crucified and laid in a tomb (**Matthew 27:32-61**) and was resurrected from the dead by the Spirit of God on the third day (**Matthew 28:1-10**). Jesus shared additional teaching with his disciples and then ascended into the heavenly realm (**Luke 24:50-53**) from which he will return some day.

Even most atheists and agnostics agree that Jesus was a real. What people disagree about Jesus is whether he was the Son of God. Many view Jesus only as a historical figure. The Jewish people do not accept that Jesus was the promised Messiah and are still looking for one to come. Christians believe Jesus was the Messiah who came, as prophesied, and fulfilled God's will in the plan of salvation.

Life of the Early Church (the family of God under the New Covenant through Jesus Christ) The twelve disciples of Jesus led the initial ministry of Jesus and saw thousands come to a saving knowledge of Jesus before the Good News or Gospel spread to all the world. Followers of Jesus then and now are known as the Church. The book of Acts and the letters of the New Testament reveal the life of the Church in the years and decades following Jesus' ascension to heaven.

What is important to note is that, as this spread took place, the family of God through the ministry of Jesus was expanded to include *anyone* who professed Him to be Savior and Lord. Jesus made it clear, "**For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life**" (**John 3:16**). Through Jesus, you can be a child in the family of God whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, whether you are male or female.

Paul underscored this in his letter to believers in the Roman province of Galatia, "**If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise**" (see **Galatians 3:26-29**). In other words, through Jesus you become part of the *everlasting* covenant and promises made to Abraham. Through Jesus you are chosen and beloved. Through Jesus, you are '**heirs according to the promise.**'

The prophecies of Daniel in the Old Testament and the words of Jesus recorded in the New Testament revealed what God was going to do in transitioning from the family of God in

the Jewish Age, that had been focused on the original Israelites, to the Church Age involving people from “**every nation, tribe, people and language**” (**Revelation 7:9**). One key passage in Paul’s letter addressed to the church at Ephesus makes it clearer. Please read **Ephesians 2:11-22**, where Paul says that everyone that was far away from the original covenants and promises, and the presence of God, are now part of it (**vv. 11-13**). Jesus broke down the barriers between the circumcised (Jews) and the uncircumcised (Gentiles) and created **one new man**, reconciling them *both* through the Cross, through whom we *all* have access to the Father by one Spirit (**vv. 14-18**). Paul closes the passage by saying that followers of Jesus, no matter who they are, are no long foreigners or aliens, but *fellow citizens* with God’s people and members of God’s household, joined *together* to be the dwelling place of God’s Spirit (**vv. 19-22**). That household is comprised of anyone who is born again of God’s Spirit through Jesus Christ. The ministry of Jesus brought about a seismic change.

The end of the Jewish Age came in 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was totally leveled, the Temple was obliterated, and inhabitants who had not fled were slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands. Jesus prophesied all this was to come as recorded in **Matthew 24**, when his disciples pointed out the beauty of the temple in Jerusalem and asked him about the end of the age. Jesus shared events that would happen in their lifetime – “**this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened**” (**Matthew 24:34**). Those events did happen and shifted the focus God’s will for His chosen family to the Church Age that has entered a third millennium, with new believers being added daily.

What Lies Ahead

What is being shared about biblical prophecy reflects the preterist understanding, i.e., most prophecies in the Bible have already been fulfilled. Futurists believe that some prophecies of the Old Testament and most of the prophecies in the New Testament have yet to be fulfilled. Debate between these views has often been heated.

Regardless of differing interpretations and views on prophecies, it is good that we debate and discuss the subject, but it is more important that we refrain from animosity that might separate and alienate us. The truth is that God will bring about all future events in His will, in His way, and in His timing. We should endeavor to move toward agreeing on what we have in common, regardless of the specifics of *how* they play out. So, what does the future hold for the Church? The New Testament reveals what we can count on:

The Second Coming of Jesus in which God’s plan of salvation will be culminated. Two important passages stating this include the words of Jesus in **John 14:1-3** and the prophetic pronouncement of the Apostle Paul in **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**.

Resurrection and judgment. Every human being will be resurrected and judgment will be made by Jesus himself (**Acts 17:30-31**). Those who are in Christ Jesus, whose

names are recorded in the Lamb's Book of Life, will meet Him and be with Him forever (**1 Thess. 4:16-18**). Those who are not children of God, whose names are not written in the Lamb's Book of Life, will be separated from the presence of God forever (**Revelation 20:11-15, 21:8**).

New, immortal heavenly bodies are provided to every member of the family of God, and they will dwell with Him forever. Two passages confirming this are **Romans 8:18-25** and **Revelation 21:1-7**.

God's Kingdom is completed. With every dominion, authority, and power that have opposed God defeated and judged, Jesus hands the Kingdom over to the Father (**I Corinthians 15:24**).

Prophecies are an integral part of the Bible. They reveal God's will for humanity and foretell key interventions to be made by God in history. Following are some additional things to consider about prophecies in the Bible. The last one is most important.

Prophecy is not a matter of private interpretation. Prophecies, like all scripture, are uniquely inspired by the Spirit. There cannot be two interpretations of a prophecy. As Peter put it, "No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (**2 Peter 1:20-21**). Since prophecies come from God, we must pray that God's *Spirit* reveals to us what is actually *in* the message. When commentators or authors differ on prophetic interpretation, someone is wrong. God only speaks the truth.

Prophets control what is prophesied. If they are speaking in the anointing of God's Spirit, they are speaking truth. If they are speaking without the anointing of God's Spirit, they may just be sharing their own thoughts, but not necessarily God's. Paul made it clear, "The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets" (**1 Corinthians 14:33**).

Prophets are not to be worshipped. Prophets, like angels, are messengers of God's Word. They should not be bowed down to or worshipped (**Revelation 22:8-9**). Prophecy needs to be studied and heeded, honoring and praising God only, who cared enough to speak through messengers.

The words of Jesus contain the central prophetic message of the New Testament. The book of Hebrews shares this eloquently, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these

last days he has spoken to us by his **Son**, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (**Hebrews 1:1-2**). Our focus needs to be on **what Jesus said**. His words are crucial to our understanding of God’s will and the future. May it rest in Him.

If you have questions or issues with prophetic utterances given by contemporary or past prophets, their messages and interpretations should always be confirmed or rejected by Scripture. Far too many ‘prophets’ throughout history have predicted events that failed to materialize. Prophets who are truly prompted to speak for God will be speaking truth and what they share will come to pass.

“Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).